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VICTOR HUGO'S NOVELS.

I.

MORE, probably, than any other great prose writer Hugo viewed words as contrivances for the production of effects of color and sound. Novelists there have been who surpassed him in graphic exactitude and colorific touch of pure description—Chateaubriand, for example, and Flaubert. But almost always there was something of a carefully planned and laboriously executed *tour-de-force* in their achievements. They wrote as they did because they willed it, not because they could not help it. With Hugo the case was different; doubtless he picked his terms and balanced his clauses consciously, but his initial conception of things and persons was unfailingly a purely pictorial or musical one, the object before him being first of all a something of sounds or a something of lights, shades, and tints. Less of *tints* in the narrower sense than of light and shade, for the contention would by no means be unwarranted that the images formed on Hugo's retina were either wholly black or wholly white or a combination of black and white streaks. Contrasts of size affected him as forcibly as those of gloom and glare; whatever was not either huge or diminutive easily escaped his attention.

His was paramountly the art of playing with contrasts, or rather with the verbal signs for contrasts—preferably sensuous and palpable contrasts, but also a few of an abstract character. No other novelist uses nearly so frequently such terms as light, shade, grand, little, night, day, dawn, twilight, finite, infinite. He also affected words suggesting limitless extension and vague, vast horror: ocean, universe, eternity, death, the tomb.

His anxiety to obtain graphic results through mere combinations of letters crops out on every page, often in odd and gro-

tesque shapes. The very titles of his novels are examples: "Bug-Jargal;" "Our Lady of Paris" (*Notre Dame de Paris*); "Ninety-Three" (*Quatre-Vingt-Treize*); "Wretches" (*Les Misérables*); "The Man that Laughs" (*L'Homme qui Rit*). There is poster art in these titles; you see them. They linger before memory's eye rather than its ear.

And then the headings of the books into which Hugo's romances are divided, and their chapters: "Night and Morn," "Supreme Shade," "Supreme Dawn," "This Will Kill That," "Face to Face with the Rock," "Face to Face with Night," "The Stone Fraternizing with the Hurricane," "The Cats Examining the Mouse," "Human Storms Fiercer than Oceanic Storms," "From the Stone Door to the Iron Door," "Fleeting Lights," "Vague Lightning at the Horizon," "Between Four Boards," "The Pearl at the Bottom of the Precipice," "The Dungeon," "At Sunrise," "The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew," "Eclipse," "Delirium."

Other headlines startle or caress the ear as much as the eye: *Foi, Loi* ("Faith, Law"), *Buvard Bavard* ("Drunkard Gossip"), *The Jacressarde*. In this class belong the numerous Latin superscriptions: *Abbas Beati Martini; Requiescant; Res Angusta; Sub Re; Sub Umbra; Foliis ac Frondibus; Abyssus Abyssum Vocat; Lex, Rex, Fex.*

In drawing with his pen the lines that combine into such chapter headings as *Nil et Nox, Vis et Vir, Turba Turma*, Hugo reveled as much in their alliterative concord as in the symmetric appearance on white paper of the pairs of black Latin capitals. The two T's in *Turba Turma* pleased his eye in somewhat the same manner as the two towers of *Notre Dame*, and the repeated sound of *Tur* struck him as admirably fitted to suggest that impetuous turbulence of the storm which he was just about to depict in a chapter of "Toilers of the Sea."

Similar idiosyncrasies led him to insert over his chapters so many stunning names of persons and places: *Quasimodo, Holmalo, Barkilphedro, Hardquanonne, Gilliatt, Gild-Holm-'Ur, Dol.*

II.

Stepping inside, we find that the posters have not lied. The show fulfills their promises. Hugo's earliest stories, "Hans of Iceland" and "Bug-Jargal," are little but collections of monstrosities put in order by an artist's hand. And even his later and superior novels might all with propriety be gathered into one colossal "Book of Wonders," the things recorded in them being such as to make the ancient compiler of a work of that name pale with envy. There is, indeed, something in Hugo of a Phlegon of Tralles. But if the scent of that freedman of Hadrian's for marvels was as keen as Hugo's, the latter possessed in addition a knack of presentation wholly wanting in Phlegon.

It is true that often, very often, Hugo in his text does not get beyond that trick of sheer verbal juxtaposition which he practices so assiduously in his superscriptions. His novels abound in passages, pages, whole chapters, of such meretricious quality. "The Man that Laughs" opens with this:

Ursus and Homo were fast friends. Ursus was a man; Homo, a wolf.¹

A chapter in "Toilers of the Sea," describing various kinds of winds, closes thus:

We have just said that the wind is the combination of all the winds. This whole horde was coming. On the one hand, this legion; on the other, Giliatt.

That sort of thing may be had for the asking, but there are always enough people to do that asking.

Indicative of the same breathless striving for effect, immediate and at any cost, is the manner in which Hugo embroiders his prose with bits of dialogue in foreign languages, snatches of startling information, reliable or unreliable, picked up in the alleys and back yards of encyclopedic learning. The "Man that Laughs" is particularly disfigured with such excrescences. Though not altogether bereft of traces of genius, it may safely be declared its author's worst novel, but it is so only because it pushes to the utmost extreme

¹For the benefit of readers not conversant with the Latin language the information serves that *Ursus* is the Latin term for a bear, *Homo* that for a man.

faults more or less conspicuous in all the others. Read the Spanish dialogue in Book II., Chapter III., beginning:

"Etcheco jaüna, ¿quién es este hombre?"

"Un hombre."

"¿Qué lenguas habla?"

"Todas."

"¿Qué cosas sabe?"

"Todas," etc. [I omit fully twice as much.]

In English:

"Tiller of the mountain, who is that man?"

"A man."

"What languages does he speak?"

"All."

"What things does he know?"

"All."

Even an exceptionally dull intellect could hardly fail to perceive that here an attempt is made to give the merest balderdash an imposing appearance by clothing it in the garb of a majestic tongue. And elsewhere in the same book Hugo proceeds still farther in the same direction. There is a chapter—the eighteenth of Book II., Part I.—in which the climax of solemn humbug is indeed reached. It is called "The Highest Resource," and narrates the sinking of a wrecked ship with passengers from sundry countries on board. After they have cast into the sea the luggage, the barrels, the bales, chains, shrouds, rigging, everything that could possibly be thrown overboard, somebody says:

"Is there anything else we can throw overboard?"

To which one of the passengers, a doctor, replies:

"Yes."

"What?" is asked.

The doctor answered: "Our crime."

They shuddered, and all cried out: "Amen."

This is bad enough, but worse is to follow. The doctor addresses the passengers, delivering himself of such comforting utterances as:

"The question is how to pass over the unknown precipice, and reach the other bank of life, which is beyond the tomb. Being the one who knows the most, my danger is greater than yours. . . . Knowledge is a weight added to conscience. . . ."

After several wonderful sayings and doings they all recite the Lord's Prayer in this fashion, the doctor beginning:

"Pater noster qui es in coelis."

The Provençal repeated in French: "Notre Père qui êtes aux cieux."

The Irishwoman repeated in Gaelic, which the Basque woman understood: "Ar nathair ata ar neamh."

The doctor continued: "Sanctificetur nomen tuum," etc.

Most people with a taste for peering into books have come across somewhere the Lord's Prayer printed in parallel columns in so and so many languages. It remained for Victor Hugo to demonstrate the possibility of turning such polyglot piety into melodramatic claptrap. It is also "The Man that Laughs" that contains the incomparable treatise on the "Comprachicos," which begins:

Who knows the word "Comprachicos," and who knows its meaning?

Satisfied of the general and lamentable ignorance on this momentous matter, Hugo continues:

The "Comprachicos," or "Comprapequeños," were a hideous and non-descript association of wanderers, famous in the seventeenth century, forgotten in the eighteenth, unheard of in the nineteenth.

Unheard of, that is, by any one but Hugo, who is able to cover many sheets with this precious knowledge of his.

George Brandes has said that the best burlesque on an author is, as a rule, written by that author himself. Hugo proves the assertion. And how gravely and deliberately he accomplishes this task of self-caricaturing!

The Comprachicos [he avers] traded in children. They bought and sold them. . . . And what did they make of these children?

Monsters.

Why monsters?

Just for fun.

There is furthermore a paragraph on such a rarity as Chinese Comprachicos, and this linguistic gem:

The Comprachicos were also called the "Cheylas," a Hindoo word conveying the image of harrying a nest.

A *Hindoo* word! But there is positively no limit to this man's erudition. Even the elder Lord Lytton would have fared ill in a competition with Hugo for a chair of omniscience. The French poet is a whole university extension

in himself. If it be something to know how to write Comprachicos in Hindoo, it must be held a still greater accomplishment to have by heart those twelve names of devils which Hugo enumerates in "Toilers of the Sea," Book I., Chapter II., or to be able to quote Onkelos, a Chaldaic author strangely neglected by most novelists. Hugo renders him justice. His good Bishop Myriel was, so he says, something of a scholar (*quelque peu savant*), and to be that implies, in Hugo's estimation, familiarity with Onkelos. It is a pity that of the doubtlessly rich treasures stored in this eminent philosopher's tomes Hugo grants us but one glimpse, in the form of a line quoted by Monsignor Myriel:

A wind coming from God blew over the face of the water.

Some slight compensation, however, for this tantalizing reticence anent Onkelos is afforded through the statement on the same page that Victor Hugo himself had a great-grand-uncle who was bishop of Ptolemaïs and published not a few pamphlets signed Barley Court. It cannot reasonably be doubted that such information benefits humanity in general, more particularly those unfortunate classes for whose moral and social improvement "Wretches" was chiefly indited.

Possibly Hugo was a trifle vain of his knowledge of Latin. He certainly delighted in displaying it. Speaking of Quasimodo, he remarks:

"His strength, so extraordinarily developed, was a cause of still greater malevolence: *Malus puer robustus*," says Hobbes.

Aside from the consideration that Hobbes was wrong in making such a general assertion—there being as many good-natured strong fellows as malicious ones, if not more—it is difficult to perceive the necessity for quoting the Englishman at all in a novel that purports to depict Parisian manners in the fifteenth century. Still more laughable is a Latin footnote to the name of Bishop Hugo of Besançon, of whom it is told in the text that he made the cell in which Claude Frollo pursued his gloomy ponderings. The footnote contains just these pithy words:

Hugo II. de Bisancio, 1326-1332.

Even "Wretches" bristles with scraps of Latin.

III.

And yet, when all is told, there remains the incontrovertible fact that over and over again Hugo proved himself a past master in forcing his readers to see and hear the things that he wished them to see and hear. Only it should be clearly understood what these things were. Chateaubriand, Flaubert, and the Goncourts make their readers behold trees, houses, rivers, and other objects of actual existence, and the vision which they compel is one that could very well have an almost exact counterpart somewhere in nature. These writers describe what they have seen or might have seen, and even when they superadd an amount of lyrical sentiment of their own making this sentiment is not allowed to blur the color or confuse the lines.

But Hugo described best such things as he had never seen and could never have seen with his bodily eye. Not that his memory was not retentive of real, palpable traits—a description like that of Little Picpus in “Wretches” shows that it was—but the impression undeniably produced by the chapters about this famous convent is to a very considerable degree due to their accumulation of historical and technical items concerning conventual life heretofore zealously guarded behind the walls of the cloister or confined within the forbidden covers of Latin ecclesiastical treatises. The author’s avowed and indubitable intention of dealing fairly with the subject raises these chapters high above the level of the greater part of what has been written on topics of this kind—Julien’s seminary life in Stendhal’s “Red and Black,” for instance. And although Hugo should by no manner of means be understood to have penetrated to the core of convent life, nor treated it with that unlimited understanding which proceeds from spontaneous sympathy alone, it is nevertheless certain that his Little Picpus has enough of the air of reality round it to justify the marked attention it has always attracted.

But—and this is the most important point by far—what Hugo attempted with fair success in Little Picpus others have attempted with fully as praiseworthy results. The fac-

ulty that was his to a degree that it was no one else's is not here brought into play. That faculty we have to look for elsewhere, and we come upon one of its manifestations, though not, perhaps, one of the sublimest, in these lines from "Ninety-Three:"

A gun that breaks its moorings [on board ship] becomes suddenly some indescribable supernatural beast. It is a machine transforming itself into a monster. This mass turns upon its wheels with the rapid movements of a billiard ball, rolls with the rolling, pitches with the pitching; goes, comes, pauses, seems to meditate; resumes its course, rushes along the ship from end to end like an arrow, circles about, swings aside, evades, rears, breaks, kills, exterminates.

The purely imaginative character of this alleged reproduction of facts is patent, but its power is scarcely less indisputable. The impetus of the following is, however, still more irresistible:

The peal of the bell was the only speech which he [the deaf bell ringer, Quasimodo] understood, the only sound which broke for him the universal silence. *He swelled out in it as a bird in the sun.* All of a sudden the frenzy of the bell seized upon him; his look became extraordinary; *he lay in wait for the great bell as it passed, as a spider lies in wait for a fly, and flung himself abruptly upon it with might and main.* Then, suspended above the abyss, borne to and fro by the formidable swinging of the bell, he seized the brazen monster by the earlaps, pressed it between both knees, spurred it on with his heels, and redoubled the fury of the peal with the whole shock and weight of his body. Meanwhile the tower trembled, he shrieked and gnashed his teeth, his red hair rose erect, his breast heaved like a bellows, his eye flashed flames, *the monstrous bell neighed panting beneath him*, and then it was no longer the great bell of Notre Dame nor Quasimodo; it was a dream, a whirlwind, a tempest, *dizziness astride of noise*, a spirit clinging to a flying crupper, a strange centaur—half man, half bell—a sort of horrible As-tolphus borne away upon a prodigious hippogriff of living bronze.

The reader will easily recall kindred revelries of a riotous fancy from Hugo's other novels—one such is the cheek-to-jowl fight between the octopus and Gilliatt in "Toilers of the Sea." From the moment that "something, thin, rough, flat, slimy, sticky, and living," winds itself round Gilliatt's bare arm in the dark the reader is constrained to hasten along at breakneck speed, whether it pleases him or not. Meanwhile Hugo remains his own provoking self. Even in the sea monster's den with his hero clasped in those live thongs whose countless lips are fastened to his flesh, seeking

to suck his blood, even here he spares us neither "Denis Montfort, one of those observers whose strong gift of intuition causes them to descend or to ascend even to magic," nor "Bonnet of Geneva, that mysterious, exact mind who was opposed to Buffon as Geoffroy Saint Hilaire was to Cuvier," nor "a piece of Chinese silk stolen during the last war from the palace of the emperor of China, and representing a shark devouring a crocodile which is devouring a serpent," etc. He drags us through innumerable paragraphs of such sham erudition and sham philosophy before he allows us more of the octopus, but we are willing to endure both Bonnet's mysterious, exact mind, Denis Montfort's gift of intuition, and the emperor of China's embroidered silk, so that we may at last get that more.

And it is the same whenever Hugo bestrides that strange Pegasus of his which he must have purloined from some nightmares' stable. He is never more royally at ease than when, starting from a point that might still be in some possible realm, he lashes himself on with his own frantic words, abandons the ordinary gait of prose narrative, rushes on in wild, uneven leaps, and finally launches into space, leaving deep beneath him all solid ground, all sense and reason.

IV.

It constituted Hugo's strength that in an age when to most people — particularly such as write — things had become words, to him words remained things; things affecting his sight, hearing, smell, taste, every one of his senses. The sound of the syllable "cold" causes him to shiver, at the word "night" his heart quakes within him as it does in a child unexpectedly let into a dark room. When coming to relate that little Cosette is obliged to go to the woods after water, late in the evening, he is seized with dizziness.

Darkness [he exclaims] makes you giddy. Man needs brightness. Who-soever becomes engulfed in the reverse of daylight feels his heart sink. When the eye sees black the spirit sees confusion. . . . No one walks alone in the nighttime through a forest without trembling.

In the midst of the deluge of abstract speculation that has

worked such irreparable havoc in nineteenth century literature and art this man remained totally incapable of pure reasoning, and averse to the use of abstractions except such as he could, as it were, make sing and glitter and roar. Even after he had made up his mind to be a philosopher and humanitarian his philosophy and humanitarianism were nothing but collocations of images. After having, for a while, amused himself by surrounding tiny white specks with oceans of black, or emphasizing the bulk of a giant by giving him a midget for a companion, he fell to pondering over what would be the result if the black submerged the white entirely, or the giant trampled on the dwarf. And the thought saddened him, forced tears from his eyes, impelled him to plead for the little white speck and the pitiable midget.

But this sentimental view of his art did not affect his artistic methods. It did not start him on a patient and thorough inquiry into human nature. He only henceforth pinned a label on the coat of his giant, informing the spectators that this was a wicked man engaged in wicked business.

In "Bug-Jargal," which was written when his sole aspirations were to bewilder and dazzle, he had placed a heroic negro in an attitude of love-stricken adoration at the feet of a frail lily of a white maiden, apparently satisfied to bring out the antithesis of color. Some years later he planted a priest with a livid, convulsed face opposite a gypsy girl of radiant beauty, turned his eyes upon her in devouring desire, and claimed to have demonstrated the absurdity of clerical celibacy. He sketched an ex-convict leading a little girl by the hand, with a scowling detective on their track, and felt satisfied that this picture doomed the entire social order. He threw a sailor into the arms of an octopus, whispered in the hollow voice of a prophet, "Mystery becomes concrete in monsters," and immediately proceeded to descant, through a stream of grandiose and droll metaphors, on conscience, hell, the final cause, the Creator.

But a faculty for abstract reasoning, though not, if properly controlled, injurious to a novelist, is by no means indis-

pensable. Hugo managed to get along very well without it, precisely because the instincts of a painter and stage manager had so strong a hold on him. He always knew where and when to relieve the monotony of a sermon by treating his audience to a picture exhibition. Farther than that, however, he was unable to go. He never rose to the creation of live men and women. He nowhere even came near it. In all his novels we recognize shadows of other men's offspring. Hans of Iceland, who roars like a lion and drinks blood out of his son's skull, the loathsome dwarf Habibrah, Quasimodo, Claude Frollo, Gwynplaine, we have come upon these grim monstrous forms somewhere else, in the fiction of Ann Radcliffe, Hoffmann, Maturin, "Monk" Lewis. Some of the secondary characters in "Hans of Iceland" and "Our Lady of Paris" are reminiscences from Walter Scott. Esmeralda is Goethe's Mignon plus a goat; Jean Valjean, Sue's Chourineur plus Hugo's vocabulary. Fleur de Marie had been abused by the Owl, little Nell had suffered untold agony in repellent surroundings long before the stupid mother of Little Cosette thrust her into the den of the Thénardiens. The influence not only of Sue and Dickens, but of other contemporary novelists, is very evident in Hugo's later productions, "Wretches" in particular. Bishop Myriel possesses hardly a modicum of commendable originality to those acquainted with Balzac's Father Bonnet. Even such a figure as Thénardier, the vulgar inn-keeper who quotes Voltaire and has pretensions to free-thinking and materialism, seems an anæmic repetition of Balzac's vile middle class specimens or Flaubert's Homais. The Duchess Josiana, in "The Man that Laughs," is but one of those legion of beautiful, aristocratic she-demons begotten by Goethe's Adelheid.

Still, Esmeralda, Quasimodo, and Jean Valjean have at least some vague semblance of life. It is when Hugo tries character drawing without the guidance of borrowed patterns that his failure becomes hopelessly obvious. What he would pass off as portraits are nothing more than arrangements in color, or rattling strings of sonorous antitheses. Co-

sette's whole person, for example, was "*naïveté*, ingenuity, transparency, whiteness, candor, a ray [*rayon*]. One might have said of Cosette that she was *clear*." Cosette was "a condensation of the light of dawn in woman's form." The detective Javert in the same novel was

composed of two sentiments, very simple and relatively very good, but made all but evil by his exaggeration of them—respect for authority and hatred of revolt. . . . He was absolute and allowed no exceptions. On one hand he said, "A public official can never make a mistake, the magistrate is never wrong;" on the other, "These people [who had once broken the law] are irredeemably lost. Nothing good may ever come from them. . . . He was stoical, severely austere; a sad dreamer, humble and haughty as fanatics are. His glance was a gimlet, cold and piercing. His whole life might be comprised in these two words: wake and watch. He had introduced the straight line into the most tortuous circumstances of life-

In this latter achievement, it should be observed, Javert had but imitated his literary lord and master, Victor Hugo. Hugo's personages are all constructed of a few lines running either straight hellward or straight heavenward. By way of diversity, he here and there conceals a noble soul behind a hideous mask, or clothes a hideous soul in a noble form. Whereupon he draws back in admiring contemplation of his own work, and emits much high-sounding gush, as when he calls Josiana "a virgin stained with every defilement in its visionary stage. . . . A possible Astarte in an actual Diana."

The speech of these beings, the dialogue which is bandied between them, is of a kind with their make-up. Like the Egyptian priests of old who vaticinated to the faithful through the open mouth of the deity's hollow statue, thereby saving the deity much trouble, Hugo is so merciful to the people whom he parades across his pages as to do all their talking for them.

When the former galley slave, Jean Valjean, sees the impending collapse of the noble structure of honesty and social respectability which he has slowly and laboriously reared for himself under an assumed name, does he then hurl at the court and the people in the courtroom a few simple, manly, passionate words, the cry of an upright, unfortunate, out-

raged soul? Far from it. From between his lips Hugo declaims in his name:

It is true what has been told you that Jean Valjean was a very wicked and unfortunate man. But perhaps it was not all his fault. . . . The jail makes the jail bird. Remember this, if you please. Before the bagnio I was a poor unintelligent peasant, some sort of idiot; the bagnio changed me. I had been stupid, I became wicked; I had been fuel, I became flame.

In "Ninety-Three" Marat, Robespierre, and Danton are heard berating one another most impressively:

"Fine as thou art," cries Marat to Robespierre, "thou wilt be dragged at the tails of four horses."

"Echo of Coblenz," hisses Robespierre between his teeth.

"I am the echo of nothing; I am the cry of the whole, Robespierre. You are young, indeed! How old art thou, Danton? Thirty-four! How many are your years, Robespierre? Thirty-three! Well, I—I have lived always. I am the old human suffering, I have lived six thousand years."

"That is true!" retorts Danton. "For six thousand years Cain has been preserved in hatred, as the toad in the rock. The rock breaks, Cain springs out among men and is called Marat."

"Thus," says Hugo, "did these three terrible men converse;" and he adds, "They were conflicting thunderbolts."

It is self-evident that such conflicting thunderbolts, such condensations of the light of dawn, such possible Astartes in actual Dianas could not be expected to move and act according to the rules that govern the lives of humdrum mortals. Hugo's world is one with all the laws of physical and moral gravitation suspended. To be sure, the plots of his novels are managed with a sort of skill, caught from Eugène Sue and Paul Féval, and not at all showing any improvement on these authors, but still effective enough to hold the attention of such readers as would tire of getting the pictures and diatribes served with no connecting thread whatsoever. Of all literary tricks, that of constructing a plot replete with suspense and surprise is the one most easily learned. It is, indeed, questionable whether it should at all be called a *literary* trick, considering its purely mechanical character.

Hugo's personages, being wholly devoid of innate individuality, yield to the requirements of his plots as readily as marionettes to the touch of their manipulator's fingers. A

man as wise and experienced as the seventy-five-year-old Bishop Myriel in the beginning of "Wretches" is said to be could not avoid long ago forming a well-grounded conviction regarding the main issues of the French revolution, and yet a volley of phrases fired at him by a dying ex-member of the convent transforms his views entirely and forces him down on his knees to beg the old radical for his blessing. Nothing is less probable than that Jean Valjean, on being caught with the Bishop's plate, should think of pretending that it had been given him as a present by that ecclesiastic. But Hugo needed this improbability (or rather impossibility) for the climax, where the Bishop saves Jean by corroborating his statement. The unlikelihood of Fantine's leaving her adored baby with those human monsters, the Thénardiens, is painfully glaring, but Hugo was bound to procure material for the affecting tableau of an innocent child in the lair of wild beasts. According to all laws of anatomy and philosophy Quasimodo, with not one limb straight nor one joint in its right place, should be as weak as a reed. Hugo makes him as brawny as seven Samsons; because otherwise somebody else would have to rescue Esmeralda and repulse the attack of the mob on the cathedral, and thus would be missed the fine effect of the stupendous hunchback seizing the lovely girl as a child would her doll, and carrying her into the church "suspended from his horny hands like a white drapery."

Doubtless Hugo would have deemed ten times as many absurdities a low price for such a scene, and who would have the heart to blame him? For it is truly a fine scene. More willingly might one dispense with the author's comments on the event, part of which is thus worded:

It was touching to behold this protection which had fallen from a being so hideous upon one so unhappy. . . . They were two extremes of natural and social wretchedness, coming into contact and aiding each other.

But this is infinitely characteristic of Hugo, as the reader will readily perceive. And so is Quasimodo's declaration of love, with its jingling metaphors:

You, you are a ray of sunshine, a drop of dew, the song of a bird [re-

member it is a deaf, semi-idiotic man that talks]. I am something frightful, neither man nor animal! Something harder, more downtrodden, and more shapeless than a pebble stone!

If you at all have a desire for this fiction, you must take it for what it is—a mixture of good and bad in nearly even proportion, sublimity garnished with fustian, rant clinging to the hem of pathos, as the shadow to the heels of a man.

V.

Victor Hugo's novels have counted their admirers by the hundreds of thousands. The geographical distribution of these worshipers would, by the way, give race theory devotees some nuts to crack. In France Hugo was long the idol of the masses, but sober judges of literature, while never failing to render due homage to his sublime lyrical genius, rated his fiction not very high. Brunetière and Zola, who differ in practically everything else, are at one on this point. In America and England the fame of these tales, even with professional critics, has, generally speaking, risen higher than in the author's own country. Not long ago the astounding declaration was made in print by a professed Dickens admirer that, all things considered, Hugo was a greater novelist than Dickens. Hugo, with not a spark of humor, not one original character creation, not even a single deathless caricature to his credit, superior to the father of Pecksniff and Chadband!

In Germany and the northern countries, where they do more and better translating of foreign literature than anywhere else, "Our Lady of Paris" is the only one of Hugo's novels that is widely known and appreciated.

It appears, then, that this writer, whose most salient characteristic as a novelist was his brilliant manipulation of those large, sonorous words of which Frenchmen are said to be immoderately fond, met nowhere with such hearty and enduring sympathy as among English-speaking men and women.

However this may be, the causes for Hugo's popularity, such as it is, are not far to seek. He threw upon vast canvases a series of pictures in which prodigious forms, human

and superhuman, were grouped with an unsurpassed insight into this department of stage craft. Thus the multitudes were attracted. They were held and filled with enthusiasm by the legends under the pictures, and the explanatory text stringing them together. This text, these legends, contain naught beyond a constant repetition of some truths to which everybody would willingly subscribe, and some platitudes which, in spite of their staleness, may still be counted on to amuse and charm big crowds. When Hugo preaches love of children, kindness to the oppressed, patience with evil doers, he says nothing that has not been uttered before and is uttered every day throughout the world in this nineteenth century. But he says it in such ringing phrases as but the very few have at their command. His elephantine joking also has its audiences.

"At St. Petersburg," he tells in "The Man that Laughs," "scarcely a hundred years ago, whenever the Czar or Czarina was displeased with a Russian nobleman, he was forced to squat down in the great antechamber of the palace, . . . clucking like a setting hen, and picking his food from the floor. These fashions have passed away, but not, perhaps, so much as one might imagine. Nowadays courtiers slightly modify their intonation in clucking to their masters. More than one picks up from the ground—we shall not say from the mud—what he eats."

When Hugo proffers such hints of his idea of wit and satire—and he does so quite often—ever so many people at once recognize it as precisely their idea of the same things, and chuckle with delight at these tremendous sallies.

This is the sense in which Hugo might be called a modern spirit. He felt exactly as the larger portion of his contemporaries did, or as they fancied they ought to feel, and he expressed his feelings better, to be sure, than they could ever dream of doing, yet never so far better as to become hard of comprehension. In no other respect was there anything essentially modern in his mental composition. The nineteenth century is over and over again spoken of as the age of exact science, but there never lived a man who cared less for exact science, or comprehended more imperfectly what the term meant, than Hugo. His knowledge was the encyclopedic hodgepodge of a second-rate mediæval bookman.

What he palms off as information regarding facts is as inaccurate as it is bombastic. Trying to impress on his readers the broadness of his religious sympathies, he makes the statement that in the synagogue, in the mosque, in the pagoda, in the *wigwam* (!), there is a hideous side which we detest, and a sublime side which we adore ("Wretches," II., book 7, 1). Wigwam in his imagination signifies an Indian place of worship!

The comparison to a mediæval bookman should not be taken as implying that Hugo possessed any of the dialectical acumen of the great scholastics. It is his childish, unsystematic curiosity, and equally infantile boasting with the smatterings which that curiosity has compiled, that recall strikingly the ways of certain monastic chroniclers.

Now it cannot be too often repeated that nineteenth century criticism and nineteenth century taste in general have been far too prone to overrate the quasi-poetical, quasi-scientific performances of mediocre individuals with a veneer of science and an inkling of poetry, and in comparison undervalue the production of the poet pure and simple. Hugo's great success proves that, after all, a man who with pen and ink creates sentiment, color, light, shade, thunder and lightning, may still count on as much appreciation as he that suspends scrolls with phrases from Comte or Spencer from the lips of paper dolls. There have, however, been writers who united a truly scientific view of life with the poet's power of reproducing that life between the covers of a volume. These writers—men like Goethe and Balzac—breathed and worked in altitudes the very existence of which Hugo never realized. The truth is, manifestations of scientific spirit inspired him with apprehension and distrust. He shared fully in the popular prejudice that a man must be heartless to investigate a case of sickness or other calamity coolly and deliberately, instead of sitting down to weep over it. One is not surprised to find him repeat, in his own jargon, the silliest of all the silly stuff that has been printed about Goethe's heartlessness. Goethe, he says ("Wretches," v. 1-16), belonged to "a family of spirits at once great and little. . . . These

thinkers forget to love. The contemplation of the zodiac absorbs them to such a degree that they fail to see the crying child."

The fact that one of Hugo's poems contains some unintelligent sneers at that theory of evolution which Balzac and Goethe anticipated would of itself count for little. It is far graver that all his novels reveal his conception of existence as a very one-sided and, in important respects, superficial one. As the years accumulate on the backs of these books, and accordingly their appeal to contemporary sentiment grows less potent, their hollowness will hardly fail more and more to betray itself. It must be declared doubtful whether then the virtues which they possess will save them from burial in oblivion.

The presence of these virtues should, however, readily be acknowledged. Hugo's extreme sensitiveness, of which mention has already been made, and his rare ability for seizing on the words fitted to express the shocks he suffered through this sensitiveness, his lyrical gift, in other words, which made him one of the greatest singers of all ages, did not altogether forsake him when he delivered himself in prose, although it is certain that his most enduring honors were won by his verse. But the lyrical flow throughout his romances at times roars so majestically, and again hums and murmurs in such insinuating notes that even a reader habitually cool forgets a good many of his objections to the forms and faces here and there reflected in the waves.

Moreover, Hugo was one of the first writers of fiction to reveal a perception of the artistic possibilities inherent in the preservation of the unity of place or, rather, of atmosphere, in a novel. Goethe had divined it before him, as his ingenious experiment in "The Elective Affinities" proves. But what he attempted by intertwining the fate of his two loving couples with the progress of the improvement of the grounds, Hugo accomplished in far more effective fashion by projecting his mediæval silhouettes on the background of the Gothic pile of "Our Lady of Paris." There is still something forced and artificial about this wedding of people with

places; the dainty dancing girl, Esmeralda, is in nowise Gothic, nor even mediæval. And the chapters dealing with the history and architecture of the cathedral are much too long and rambling. Nevertheless, what Hugo here did was something very extraordinary, very admirable, and it is characteristic of Edgar Poe's scent for just that kind of artistic devices that he brought it in for particular praise when reviewing Dickens' "Barnaby Rudge."

Subsequent novelists have taken the hint from Hugo. Zola's gin mill in "L'Assommoir" is a direct, though perhaps not at once recognizable, descendant of Hugo's cathedral, and Thomas Hardy would scarcely have made the use he does of Christminster in "Jude the Obscure," had "Our Lady of Paris" never been written.

And here I have pointed out the heirloom which has come down from the novelist Hugo to his younger fellow-craftsmen. His prose tales have left few other traces in the fiction of his century. Probably Fantine had something to do with the making of Lukeria in Dostojevsky's "Crime and Punishment," and without a doubt there are echoes of Hugo's rhetoric reverberating in that book and others of the Russian; but for the most part Hugo's romances have remained and must ever remain sterile, like all hybrids. Hybrids they are, a mongrel breed of lyricism, oratory, and the wildest fairy lore.

But that this singer, this orator, this myth maker should have felt himself constrained to compose novels demonstrates, perhaps better than any other one fact, how completely prose fiction has carried everything before it in the past century's literary evolution ever since that *genre* grew big and strong under the nursing hands of a Goethe, a Scott, and a Balzac. And true as it is that Hugo's romances are a mongrel breed—to be wholly just, this statement calls for the qualification that these hybrids bear the unmistakable mark of having been conjured into existence by the compelling will of a master—a poet.

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